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Western News: Tough questions greet EPA's Martin

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Tough questions greet EPA's Martin

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By Canda Harbaugh, The Western News | [0 comments](#)

The Environmental Protection Agency's new regional chief answered tough questions from local officials and the public last week during his second Libby visit since taking the job in April.

"I'm raising my grandson here. Is it safe to raise a child here?" Patti Lennard asked Region 8 Administrator Jim Martin on Friday during a public session. "Is it safe for us to play at Asa Wood?"

Martin's response reflected that of EPA officials before him – asbestos exposure has been greatly reduced. He is hopeful, though, that forthcoming toxicity information will help the agency understand the level at which Libby amphibole asbestos is unsafe and bring the EPA closer to a more definitive answer.

"I wish I could give you a yes or no answer, but I can't," he said. "I can tell that we have dramatically reduced concentrations of this asbestos fiber in the ambient air ... We have dramatically reduced the amount of vermiculite in about 1,500 homes. We've removed a million cubic yards out of this community and Troy to one of two of those disposal sites."

Ambient air sampling in the Libby area and activity-based sampling in Libby schools suggests the presence of extremely low levels of asbestos, he said.

"I don't know if I can tell you what safe is," he replied, "but we will have a better sense of it when we get those studies in the spring."

Once toxicity information is available and the EPA establishes a risk assessment for Libby amphibole asbestos, some properties will be cleaned over again to adhere to the new standard, Martin said in response to a resident's question.

"What we're going to learn from the reports we're going to have in the spring are going to give us a much better sense of what more needs to be done," he said.

Martin agrees with the rumor that EPA is trying to finish up with the Superfund site as soon as possible, though he said it won't be a fly-by-night job. The EPA will also be sensitive to the fact that Libby and Troy's economy is linked to the cleanup, he said.

"We're a major employer. We're a significant part of the economy now," he said. "You're not going to wake up one morning and discover we're gone. We'd love to be gone, but we're going to make sure the job is done before we leave."

In addition to speaking with members of the public, Martin held meetings with representatives of

the congressional delegation, Libby City Council, Lincoln County Board of Commissioners, Center for Asbestos Related Disease and the Healthy Communities Initiative Group.

After those talks, he acknowledged that the EPA must communicate with the public in more ways. The agency is also committed, he said, to working with the Libby City Council to help clean up the former export plant property so that Riverfront Park can be expanded. The EPA issued its first Records of Decision this past May for the city-owned land, as well as privately-owned property at the former screening plant site.

In the EPA environment, Records of Decision are routinely issued, he explained, but he understands that residents have reservations about them.

"In our lives it's a Record of Decision and no big deal," he said. "It's obviously a bigger deal for folks here so before we issue anymore Records of Decision, we're going to come back and talk to people and make sure everyone understands what we're thinking and why we're thinking it and get people to tell us what they think."

The EPA must at least issue a ROD, or a final decision that is very similar to a ROD, for the industrial district in order to attract businesses and capital investment for economic development, he said.

Martin met with local leaders three months ago during his first Libby visit since President Obama appointed him this spring as leader of EPA's Denver-based Region 8. The region covers Montana, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming and 27 tribal nations.

Martin said he is committed to visiting Libby at least four times a year. He expects to be back in the spring.